MSOAG: An example for Transition Teams to follow

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An advisory role has been at the fore-front of the Marine

Corps priorities since the inception of the Global War on

Terror. One of the ways to address the issue was the creation

of the foreign military training unit (FMTU), which is now known

as Marine special operations advisor group (MSOAG) and a special

operations command (SOCOM) subordinate command. SOCOM's newest

asset has quickly become an example for conducting foreign

internal defense[1] and advisory missions. The Marine Corps should

model their training teams in a manner similar to MSOAG's

because of its method of training and organizing its teams and

due to the need to change the Marine Corps' insufficient support

structure for training teams.

MSOAG's method of training and organizing

The FMTU was created to be II Marine Expeditionary Force's

(MEF) unit of choice to conduct advisory missions. When Marine

Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC) was activated

in February 2004, the USMC lost its formal advisory unit to

SOCOM. Shortly after its creation, MSOAG developed an initial

training period of instruction (ITPOI) for its deploying teams.

Through the ITPOI and a regionally aligned task organization, an

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[1] Foreign Internal Defense - Participation by civilian and
military agencies of a government in any of the action programs
taken by another government to free and protect its society from
subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency. Also called FID.
Joint Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Foreign Internal
Defense (FID), Joint Pub 3-07.1, 26 June 1996.

efficient method was established for teams to deploy to conduct

foreign internal defense.[2]

Before Marines can enter the MARSOC community, they are

screened and assessed to ensure they have the basic skills

necessary. The underlying theme is finding the right Marine who

has the ability to work in a diverse environment with very

little support from entities outside his team. These attributes

are required for an advisor, regardless of unit:

> The importance of the advisor mission, linked as it is
> to the strategic focus of building host-nation
> militaries in order to allow us to scale down US
> involvement, demands that we send our best. A 10- to
> 17-man advisor team is too small to carry a
> substandard performer. It will be no easy task to
> select those Marines best qualified for duty as
> foreign military trainers and advisors.[3]

Once selected, a Marine attends the ITPOI, which is

centered on taking an individual Marine and enhancing his light-

infantry and supporting skills, to enable him to join a Marine

special operations team for world-wide deployment. Each Marine

executes the portion of the ITPOI that equips all Marines with

basic infantry tactics to establish known and equal skill sets.

A subject matter expert (SME) evolution follows. Each Marine,

who will serve a billet corresponding to their primary military

occupational specialty, learns enhanced skills through a variety

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[2] MSOAG Command Brief, December 2008
[3] Marine Foreign Military Advisors: The Road Ahead, *Marine Corps Gazette,* April 2006, www.mca-marines.org/gazette, The Marine Corps Association, 62-65.

of schools, embedded training periods, and seminars. The key takeaway is that while SMEs do exist, each Marine is able to execute any job on a team through training.[4]

    After completion of the ITPOI, each Marine joins his team and executes a team skills phase. Tactics, techniques, and procedures, standard operating procedures, and roles are established here. This phase concludes with a large amount of language and culture-based training and an operational readiness evaluation (ORE), which if passed, certifies the team as mission capable.[4] All of the training mentioned is taught by MARSOC Marines, which allows in-house quality control to ensure that standards are maintained with each team receiving the same training.

    The advantages to a robust pre-deployment training block are numerous. Each Marine is given the tools to solidify his ability to be a good advisor, knowing not only how to do his job but also all the billets on the team. The amount of time before the first deployment allows the team to sort out all of the nuances that a team just put together a couple of months previously is not privy to. A series of checks and balances are present to ensure that the objectives of the ITPOI are met. The team establishes its SOPs, as well as language and culture skills that will aid the team during deployments.

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[4] MSOAG Command Brief, Dec 2008

Yet another reason for MSOAG's success is they manner in which MSOAG teams are task organized into companies to correspond with the area of responsibility (AOR) to which they will be assigned. To enhance the skills required for each AOR, teams receive language, culture, weapons, and tactics training necessary to operate in their specific environment. The training work-up described is normally over seven months with over 200 hours of language and culture included.[5]

The current issues with training teams

The current paradigm that training teams operate in does not allow for them to be as effective as they could be if given the time and resources similar to those of MSOAG. A team cannot be formed from a variety of commands only months prior to deployment. This is not ample time for the team to execute all of the required training mandated by the division headquarters or by team leaders. The additional time available to MSOAG teams enables leaders to identify strengths and weaknesses of the team, conduct pre-deployment site surveys well in advance of deployment, and to tailor necessary training based off these findings.[6]

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[5] MSOAG Command Brief, December 2008
[6] Advising Foreign Forces: A Compilation of Reports; Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, 31 January 2007.

For example, one of the reoccurring comments from transition teams returning from a deployment is that they did not receive enough mission-specific training. The ITPOI is a proven entity that negates this problem. It also provides the Marines on the team with basic, but necessary, skill sets that run a broad spectrum, creating a redundancy that is a force multiplier.

The current support structure

An easy way of developing the measure of effectiveness in supporting training teams prior to deployment is to evaluate the process of how they man, train, and organize. As previously stated, MSOAG has a streamlined and standardized method for executing this process. Alternately, there have been numerous after-action reports stating the lack of resources and personnel and equipment available for pre-deployment training. This issue arises despite the fact there are numerous agencies in place that aid training teams during their pre-deployment phase.[7] The question lies in how the Marine Corps has task-organized these teams and placed them in an improper structure to aid them before, during, and after their deployment.

One of these units was created in the wake of the first iterations of training deployments in support of the GWOT. The

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[7]Advising Foreign Forces: A Compilation of Reports; Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned, 31 January 2007.

Advisor Training Group (ATG), based out of Marine Corps Ground

Combat Center (MCGCC), has the responsibility to "train Marine

Corps Advisor Teams to advise, mentor, and train foreign

military, police, and border units in operational techniques and

procedures to combat terrorism and counterinsurgency."[8] It

places the teams in a realistic environment and focus on

building the team's advisory capability. Teams are required to

attend the 19-day course after completing the 54-day individual

and team skills phases, which are supervised by the MEF or

Marine Forces Command (MARFOR). The issue is the short amount

of time spent under the tutelage of ATG. The team "may not know

what they don't know" until they arrive at the MCGCC. This

deficiency can be mitigated if the team is formed early enough

to conduct a vigorous training plan in a situation similar to

the environment created by ATG. However, as mentioned earlier,

this is often not the case.[9]

Other units available to training teams are the Security

Cooperation Education and Training Center (SCETC) and the Center

for Advanced Operation Cultural Learning (CAOCL). SCETC serves

as the focal point for all security cooperation matters by

providing advisor and other training in support of training

teams. They also serve as the clearing house for all partner

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[8] ATG Command Brief, December 2008
[9] ATG Command Brief, December 2008

nation requests for training, serve as a bank-of-sorts for Foreign Military Sales (FMS) associated with training missions, and conduct coordination with component commands for training missions.[10] CAOCL provides language and culture training to deploying units. Their training is typically conducted in four blocks. The first three are conducted by the individual Marine at their home station, with the fourth being conducted during pre-deployment training at Mojave Viper. With offices at most major bases, Marines can use the predominately self-paced text software at their place of choosing and still have a local support network to fall back on.[11]

To address the requirement for training teams directly, the Marine Corps created the Marine Corps Training and Advisor Group (MCTAG) after FMTU became a SOCOM entity. MCTAG was designed to "provide conventional training and advisor support to Host Nation Security Forces (HNSF) or to general purpose forces partnering with HNSF IOT develop and build partner nation capacity in support of civil and military operations." [12] MCTAG is task-organized with a pre-deployment training plan similar to MSOAG's, the only differences are who they work for and the extent of the skill sets MCTAG bring to work in a host nation.

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[10] SCETC Information Brief, 28 Jan 2008
[11] CAOCL Command Brief, 28 Jan 2008
[12] MCTAG Command Brief to TECOM CG, November 2008

At the time of its creation, MCTAG was originated to solve the delta in teams required versus what the MEFs could provide for Operation Iraq Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), as well as supporting Geographic Combatant Commander's (GCC) Theater Security Cooperation (TSC) plan. However, MCTAG's role has changed recently in that they will not provide teams to support OIF and OEF.[13] Even though this will provide professional advisors to support the GCCs and indirectly to the GWOT, it does not solve the Marine Corps issue of the quantity and quality of training teams needed for the two combat theaters.

Counter-arguments

Many senior Marines believe that a need does not exist to create special units to enable mission accomplishment, regardless of the task. As was the case when MARSOC was established, many general officers did not believe that there was a need for "special" Marines.[12] While every Marine will find a way to accomplish its mission, the creation of MSOAG or MCTAG are vital to our current operating environment due to the skill sets they possess and the access they are granted.

A similar argument made by senior officers is that leaders have to be able to do more with fewer assets available.

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[13] Interview with Principle Director, Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, Office of the Secretary of Defense

Training teams have been able to succeed despite institutional shortcomings such as these ideas to this point. They succeed in their individual mission. If they were given ample time with an appropriate amount of advisory training before they deployed, these successes would be amplified.

Creation of a permanent unit has other positive impacts. MSOAG deploys the same teams to work with the same host nation units several times a year. This building-block approach not only builds report between the units, but it also allows for the MSOAG teams to see the progress that was gained while they were not in country. Identifying what was retained and what the host nation trained to when an American was not present provides conclusions on the effectiveness of our training. Unfortunately, this is not possible with the current model in place.

Ways to improve the deficiencies

While steps are being taken to create the best product available, other ways exist in which the training teams can be better supported and through which all operational needs are met. The first way, as previously mentioned, is to give the teams adequate time to conduct pre-deployment training that supports the full gamet of skill sets required. At a minimum, a team needs six months to prepare adequately, with nine to twelve months being ideal. The reference would be the MSOAG model that

established a minimum of six months, with the standard being nine months, allotted from the day the team is formed until it deploys.

The second way is to create a single unit that serves to man, organize, and train all of the training teams for the Marine Corps. A transfer of responsibility for any training or services needed to support the team would not occur. This would be a permanent command with Marines receiving PCS or PCA orders to join the unit. This command would establish an internal training pipeline, similar to MSOAG's, that builds on the inherent and basic MOS skills Marines possess. The instruction would focus on tactics, techniques, and procedures required for advising host nation forces. With MCTAG possessing only 42 Marines, of which eighteen are active duty and not reaching a full operational capability until fiscal year 2011, it cannot meet the Marines Corps requirement as a single entity regardless of their current mission. SCETC and CAOCL would continue to provide their already mentioned critical functions, and the whole system would tie together as a synergized entity.[14]

Another way to enable the training teams to have the necessary personnel, training, and resources available mandates a change in Marine Corps thinking. If Marine expeditionary units, MARFORs and Security Cooperation MAGTFs were the only

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[14] MCTAG Command Brief to TECOM CG, November 2008

entities tasked to conduct non-combat security cooperation missions, other units would be free to conduct the OIF and OEF missions. MCTAG would then be able to support OIF and OEF in this regard, and notably, be the best option available.

Conclusion

While some may ascertain that the current model is working and that change is not needed, multiple sources seem to say otherwise. A more streamlined approach can be taken that makes their job easier, more functional and enhances their capabilities. Time, the right personnel for the job, and a centralized command structure providing the best possible training available, are essential. By establishing a new unit with few instructions on how to do it, MSOAG succeeded in creating a model for the Marine Corps to emulate.

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